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Date: July 17, 2022
Sermon: "Our Urban Renewal"
Scripture: Psalm 121:1-2 and Luke 6:12
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Scripture, *in unison*

*"I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth."*

Psalm 121:1-2

*"Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the
night in prayer to God."*

Luke 6:12

Sermon "Our Urban Renewal" David Johnson Rowe

I'm not naturally inclined toward nature. And in one of my books I tell about taking a Habitat for Humanity work camp to Peru—Puna, Peru, 13,000 feet high. We arrived at night and went immediately to the work site to check it out.

I gathered everybody around to give instructions for the day ahead, to remind them of our progress to serve the poor, to browbeat them, motivate them. Meanwhile, my son Aaron, who was 10 at the time, was pulling on my leg, interrupting me. "Dad, look up!" "Hush." He keeps tugging harder, "Dad, look up!" "Hush," I say stronger. "DAD," he yells. So I look up. It's pitch black. There is no electricity around us, no lights anywhere. We are at 13,000 feet. And when I look up, WOW! My son was right! Thousands of stars . . . at 13,000 feet, so close you think you can touch them. It felt as though God was giving a light show just for us. I'm glad he made me look up.

In another book I recall my father's advice about being a good runner and staying strong. "Look up," he said. Look up. Look ahead. Look around. Me? As a runner, I was always looking down, watching out for rocks, debris, cracks in the street, pitfalls, always ready for the negative stuff, missing the scenery and the joy.

I was an old-fashioned runner back when it was a discipline to be mastered, a punishment to be endured. Where the joke was—or maybe it wasn't a joke—that "running is like beating your head against a brick wall . . . you do it because it feels so good when you stop." The Bible agrees with my father. "Look up." And my son, "Look up."

Psalm 121 has that wonderful verse, *"I will lift mine eyes up unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."*

God and nature. A good team. God and beauty. God and inspiration. My father, my son, and the Bible all agree, it seems, that when you need help, when you could use some inspiration, you need to do your part, you need to be active, awake, alert.

You need to look up and out, beyond yourself. Hey, we all have resources inside ourselves, also, but most of those come from when we "looked up," when we got beyond ourselves.

In the last two weeks, three people in our Church have given me a book to read. Each book filled with wisdom, insight, help. My friends reached outside themselves to read a book; then they reached beyond themselves to convince me to read the book; and I took their advice. I could've said, "I have enough books." I could've said, "I write my own books." But I've finally learned to "look up . . . and out . . . and around." To accept the inspiration, the wisdom, the renewal that is outside and all around.

The Bible keeps pressing this idea. "Look to the Lord and his strength." (Psalm 105:4) You see that? Look—outside yourself, away from yourself. "Those who look to God are radiant." (Psalm 34:5) Now, there's a promise! We will be brightened, enlightened. We will see better, clearer.

"Let your eyes look straight ahead." (Proverbs 4:25) Don't be like me, looking down, thinking negatively, expecting trouble. Look up! Look ahead.

"Open your eyes and look at the fields," the Bible says, "consider the lilies." That's classic nature. The Bible points us toward fields, mountains, rivers, lakes, wilderness, desert, meals, worship, enforced isolation, sudden community, spontaneous crowds, caves, capital cities, even jail time as places of inspiration. The Bible says lots of all that and more, anything and everything as sources for giving us the break we all need, the wake-up call, the nudge, the renewal, the refreshment, at just the right time. Like a vacation, a sabbatical, a holiday, a retreat, a change of pace.

I'm not claiming to be a full-bore naturalist. We all find beauty and inspiration in different ways. When I was being hired here, the committee showed me the gigantic back yard outside the bay window at the Parsonage and asked me what I would do with it. I said, "I'd put down asphalt and put in two basketball courts." I mention that embarrassment only to emphasize that inspiration, renewal, beauty is not a "one-size-fits-all" thing.

There was a wonderful old religious TV show called "Look Up and Live." That's my message. Look up. Look up and live. Look up and be moved, revived, inspired.

You know where that phrase comes from? It's a yucky story for me to tell because I hate snakes. But when the Jewish people escaped from slavery, on their journey toward freedom they lost sight of their goal, they forgot the miracle of God that set them free, and they turned toward whining—never a good idea. So God sent them a plague of snakes, all those slimy, creepy-crawly things that I can't even think about without wanting to hide.

Well, Moses then prayed to God for an antidote, and God told him to make a pole and wrap a bronze snake around it and have the people "look up and live." No more fear of snakes. No more snake bites. No more negativity. "Look up and live!" Which of course becomes the symbol of medicine—a snake wrapped around a pole, "look up and live."

The last few weeks I've been hearing your plans for summer renewal. I've heard places: Nantucket, Vermont, skiing in Idaho (who knew?), Boston, Maine, Canada. I've heard activities: beaches, reading, sailing, sports camps, hiking.

For Alida and me, it's asphalt, concrete, and cobblestones. Our retreats, our vacation, our renewal. It's always some form of old European cities, Prague, Paris, Florence, Madrid. Hard sidewalks, Busy streets ancient cobblestones, sweaty crowds—all leading to ancient churches with medieval art and startling sculptures, each art work recreating Bible stories and saints slaying dragons, Mary bouncing the Baby Jesus on her knee or cradling the dead Jesus in her arms; crucifixion and Christmas side by side.

We sit in the pews. We kneel at the altars. We light candles and then go off and do it all over again. This is our idea of refreshment, inspiration, a break. It is our own "urban renewal," as my sermon title suggests, getting our renewal from some of the great cities of the world.

I also know what some of you will do this summer. You'll go to a Yankee game. You'll drive down Rte. 95 in heavy traffic to the Cross Bronx Expressway, to the Major Deegan, exit at 161st St., park in the parking lot shaped like a prison with

a chain link fence topped by barbed wire alongside the Harlem River. You'll walk a mile to Yankee Stadium; sit in melting heat for three hours, drinking \$12 warm beer, eating a \$10 rubber hot dog on a stale bun. And you know what? You'll love it! You'll talk about that game for the next year and remember it the rest of your life. At your funeral, someone will tell about that time you took him to Yankee Stadium. And no one will mention the heat, the barbed wire, or the bad food. They will remember you . . . being there . . . looking up, and living life.

Our Scripture today linked two verses about inspiration, taking a break, getting away. The first I've already mentioned, Psalm 121, "I will lift mine eyes up unto the hills."

My previous Church was up in the Berkshires, Pittsfield Massachusetts. My last Sunday before moving here I preached on this Psalm because it's known as "The Psalm of the Berkshires."

The Berkshires have suffered economically. They've been hit hard by opioid addiction and death. They feel ignored by Boston. They say they have only two seasons: July 4th and winter. But, by God, it is beautiful. Every time you open your eyes, God inspires you. Your spirit has a vacation, you are lifted up.

I told people it felt like every day God painted a painting just for me. The other verse is about Jesus. It says Jesus's custom at night was to go up a mountain and pray. His days were frantic and frenetic, always urgent, people crowding around him, wanting, needing, pressing, pressuring. And he never said "No." But at night he'd take a break. He'd leave behind the demands of daily life, he'd look up, find a hill or mountain, and go off . . . to pray. Only to return the next day, refreshed. That's why the Disciples went to Jesus one day and begged, "Lord, teach us to pray." They had seen how transformed he was, how strengthened, revived, equipped he was to face the next day.

Our trips to old cobblestone cities and your days on the beach, and a visit to Yankee Stadium or pursuing your favorite hobby may not sound like the spiritual equivalent of Jesus going up onto a mountain to pray, but it can come close.

After Jesus had his time away, after his mountainside prayer retreat, after his break, the world awaited him with full force. So does our world. The War in Ukraine is only getting worse. In our little Church there'll be even more refugee families to settle. There are only 50 weeks till the next Appalachia mission trip. Only 42 till the next Dogwood Festival.

And you will have doctor visits, college visits, surgeries and treatments, crises and disappointments, the full range of daily, weekly, hourly ups and downs.

There'll be our everyday efforts to be a Church that loves without hesitation, serves without question, gives without limit.

So, get to Cape Cod, Maine, and Canada, see Grandma and waterfalls and sunsets, fish for the big one that got away, sail the "ocean blue" (or at least the Long Island Sound), read that book you put aside, go for that long run you love so much, climb that mountain. Look up. Look around. Look beyond.

Or follow Alida and me to Florence, Italy, tomorrow! We will surround ourselves with Michelangelo, Botticelli, da Vinci, Donatello. We will immerse ourselves in pasta. But my highlight will be our pilgrimage to the Convent of San Marco, home to 50 frescoes, stunning frescoes by the monk artist Fra Angelico.

Throughout the convent, from the hallway to the dining hall, to each monk's tiny little bedroom cell, Fra Angelico created Biblical frescoes, bringing Jesus's life to a creative brilliance that takes our breath away, brings tears to our eyes, and reminds us how much we want to get back here to do the work of faith.

European cobblestones, New England beaches, lakeside cottages, or in a hammock reading a book: take that deep breath, feed your spirit, get revived.

There's plenty to do once you're back. And oh, my, do we have just the job for you!

Our closing hymn today is the "Northfield Benediction."

A Benediction is a blessing, usually given by the pastor to the congregation. This summer, we will end each service by blessing one another, using the "Northfield Benediction." David attended the Northfield-Mount Herman School, founded by American Evangelist D. L. Moody. The Northfield Benediction is part of the musical tradition of that school, and based on the familiar Scripture of benediction in Numbers 6:24-26. Let's treasure this mutual blessing.

*"The Lord bless thee and keep thee,
The Lord make His face shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee,
And be gracious unto thee;
The Lord lift up his countenance,
His countenance upon thee,
And give thee peace!"*